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India in the Muslim Imagination: Cartography and Landscape in 19th Century Urdu Literature

Faisal Devji

1 The 'Muslim community' emerged in India in the latter half of the 19th century as a new kind of sociological category. This emergence was linked to the designs and exigencies of British rule in India, including its deployment of new forms of classification like cartography and demography to define subject populations (Cohn 1990). More interesting, however, was the way in which these designs and exigencies also provided Muslims with the opportunity to re-define who they were (Devji 2007a). One such definition of the Muslim community was that of the 'modernist' gentlemen gathered in the Aligarh Movement.[1] Led by the influential writer and institution-builder Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the Aligarh Movement was made up largely of well-born North Indian Muslims. Named after the town in northern India that housed its most prominent institution, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, later Aligarh Muslim University, the Aligarh Movement was also primarily a North Indian phenomenon. Founded by a group of men who belonged to a class of professional or salaried gentry which had furnished administrators to pre-colonial states and now attempted to do the same for colonial India, the Aligarh group called itself a party or school in English, and a movement or *tahrik* in Urdu, and its important activities, the college apart, comprised the Muhammadan Educational Conference and voluminous writings, including a journal, the *Tahzib-ul Akhlaq* or Refinement of Morals. The birth of this new collectivity was signaled by its adoption of a name unknown to history, with Muslims in the 19th century calling themselves a *qawm*, an Arabic word meaning something like a tribe or people that had rarely been used to describe religious groups in the past. Eventually this word would become an equivalent for the equally novel term 'nation' in South Asia. Notwithstanding their reference to ties of kith and kin in other contexts, neither community nor *qawm* were names used to describe local forms of Muslim belonging, being deployed instead to

represent the disparate, dispersed and merely demographic collection of Queen Victoria's Muslim subjects.

2 While its demographic boundaries may have been mapped by the colonial census and its juridical borders by Anglo-Muhammadan law, the Muslim community was occupied by Indians themselves in different ways. Indeed it soon became the site of great struggles between Muslim groups in northern India, primarily Sunni clerics and their relatives among the laity. Both these groups belonged to the same class of minor landholders, administrators and bureaucrats, all Urdu-speaking, who had been liberated by colonial rule from the kings and nobles they had once served. Fully conscious of their independence, these men called themselves *sharif* or wellborn, and set out to recast Islam in their own image, thus lending the *qawm* some substance as an ethnic category. It was the laymen who set the terms of debate in this struggle, and especially those who gathered under the pro-British sign of the Aligarh Movement. In this essay I want to look at the way in which the gentlemen who led Aligarh situated their community within India as a new kind of political space. What kind of geography, in other words, made the Muslim community possible?

Between Person and Place

3 In an essay dating from 1884, Sayyid Ahmad Khan defined territorial belonging in the following manner:

> You must have seen or heard in old histories and books, and (indeed) we see even today, that (the word) *qawm* refers to the inhabitants of one country (*mulk*). The different peoples of Afghanistan are called a (single) *qawm.* The different peoples of Iran are called Irani. Europeans are of different beliefs (*khayalat*) and religions. But all are counted as (part of) one *qawm,* (and) although people from other countries come and live among them, (still) they mingle and are called one *qawm.* Indeed from antiquity the word *qawm* (has) referred to the inhabitants of a country even if they possess many distinctions. O Hindus and Muslims! Do you live in any other country but India (*Hindustan*)? Do you not both live on this land (*zamin*)? Are you not buried in this earth or cremated on its *ghats*? If you die and live on this (land), then remember that Hindu and Muslim are religious terms, otherwise Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, too, who live in this country, constitute a single *qawm* for this reason. (S.A. Khan 1963 [1889]: 161)

4 The words for country (*mulk, zamin, Hindustan*) in this passage are all deployed ambiguously; one does not know if they refer to country as region, country as state or both. Given this, it is not surprising to discover that being Indian here is defined simply by habitation, with no idea of blood-and-soil belonging implied: thus Sir Sayyid's inclusion of immigrants as countrymen, something that refers indirectly to the 'foreign' genealogies of the Muslim gentry. Yet this purely contemporary or non-historical way of being Indian, one that could include Indian and European Christians as well, has to derive its identity from such a genealogical term as *qawm.* Belonging as *qawmiyyat* presumes the prior and separate existence of such groups that are not tied to territory, which is thus vitiated as the foundation of a positive identity. After 1886, therefore, when the autonomy of the Muslim community was threatened by the representative claims of the Indian National Congress, it was easy for Sir Sayyid to discard the notion of belonging as *qawm* altogether, retaining only that of India as a site of habitation. It was this

subordination of people to land that led to a new and widespread notion of Muslims as a community simultaneously trapped in and alienated from India:

> [W]hat especially has caused the decline of the unfortunate Indian Muslims has been their adoption of India as a homeland (*watan*), and their forsaking of their original (*asli*) homes. When the Muslims arrived in India they were very robust, rosy complexioned, strong and healthy. Their natures (*tabiat*) were free as well. There was some spirit (*josh*) in their hearts as well. They were ignorant of the ties of custom (*rusum*). But when they made India their homeland and joined with those nations (*qawm*) that were inferior to them in strength, courage, freedom, knowledge and livelihood, (nations) in whose veins flowed restrictions, slavery to custom, and narrow-mindedness, then they, too, became so. Their true condition was completely transformed. The blood of Abraham that was in our veins was transformed. That bone which was made of Ishmael's blood was transformed. That heart which harbored the Hashemite spirit was transformed. Skin itself changed. Color changed. Appearance changed. Life changed. The heart changed. Imagination (*khayal*) changed. So much so that religion changed as well. All that energy (*josh*) which arose in the sandy wastes of Arabia to revive and delight Iran and the whole of Central Asia, arrived in India only to be washed away in the Bay of Bengal. (M.A. Khan 1904: 33)

5 Mahdi Ali Khan, who would become Sayyid Ahmad Khan's lieutenant and successor at Aligarh, was the author of this passage from a lecture given at the Mirzapur Institute on 22 October 1873. His lament on the decline of the Indian Muslim plays to the vision of a corrupting tropical climate, whose preeminent victims are Hindus. But more than this, it betrays both a humiliation that seeks to dissociate itself from the scene of colonial conquest, and a sense of community that finds itself lost in India as a profoundly alien political space. The novelty and importance of such an idea of the community's situation was remarked upon by another modernist, the mathematician and historian Muhammad Zakaullah:

> I cannot bear to hear Indian Musulmans speaking without reverence and affection for India. It is a new fashion, unfortunately springing up, which did not exist in my younger days. (Andrews 1929: 111)

6 Even if many Muslims spoke of India, but more especially of their *watan* or home districts, with affection, their community's imprisonment in a new India continued to provide them with a peculiar mode of being that had to do with a state in which they had become a minority. This was especially the case once colonial policy started being informed by demographic statistics in forms like the census. So Hali, in a poem of 1888 entitled the *Shikwa-e Hind* (Complaint to India), represents the country as the typical cruel beloved of the *ghazal* lyric, who he interrogates as a lover seduced by her only to be destroyed. And this novel use of the beloved familiarizes the new India in terms of an old problematic, that of desire and seduction, thus establishing for the country a kind of continuity with the past while simultaneously illustrating the sheer novelty of its situation, which cannot be otherwise grasped. Hali's attitude towards India here is far more complex than that of Mahdi Ali Khan:

> *Rukhsat ay Hindustan! Ay bustan-e be khizan!*
> *Rah chuke tere bahut din bidesi mehman*
> (Hali 1970 [1888]: 182)
> Farewell O India! O autumn-less garden!
> We have remained your foreign guests for many a day.
> *Kar diya sheron ko tu ne gosfand ay khak-e Hind*
> *Jo shikar afgan the a kar ho gaye yan khud shikar*
> (Hali 1970 [1888]: 182)

You have turned lions into sheep, O soil of India
Those who were hunters arrived here to become prey.
Tha yaqin ham ko ke shamat rafta rafta aegi
Humko tu ay khak-e Hind akhir yun hi kha jaegi
(Hali 1970 [1888]: 187)
We knew that absorption would come surely
That you would finally devour us like this, O soil of India.
Phir gai sarhad se teri fawj-e Yunan jis tarah
Kash phir jate yun hi dar se tere nakam ham
(Hali 1970 [1888]: 187)
Just as the Greek army turned away from your border
If only we too had turned away from your door unsuccessful.
Par zamane men rahenge ta qiyamat yadgar
Jo kiye bartao tu ne ham se ay Hindustan!
(Hali 1970 [1888]: 195)
But time will retain the memory until Judgement Day
Of the treachery you have done us, O India!
Sanp se jis tarah rahta hay sapera dur dur
Hukmran tere yun hi tujh se rahenge bar kiran
(Hali 1970 [1888]: 196)
In the way that the snake charmer remains distant from the snake
Your rulers will likewise keep their distance from you.

7 This last couplet plays upon a literary theme regarding the seductive power of India and the fear of going native, but in a very different way from similar sentiments in English literature. On the one hand Hali is trying to build a relationship between Muslims and Englishmen as conquering peoples, a relationship mediated by the sexualized figure of a female India; but on the other he recognizes that Muslims have collapsed into India as an object, one whose only subject is the Englishman. The community has been subordinated to a conquered territory and objectified with it. Hali's uncertainty regarding India, however, is due to more than a simple unease in the face of the colonial state. His novel personification of the country as a cruel beloved indicates a struggle to place value on this new India. And valuing is something very modern in that it replaces metaphysical relationships with positivistic ones, since only an autonomous object can be valued by the equally self-subsistent subject who knows it.[2] One way of describing such value is by connecting it to the commodity, which, as a product of abstract labor, ends up becoming a kind of object with which traditional relationships, genealogical ones, for instance, cannot be built. India, too, is created as a commodity (India as prostitute, for example, which is what she finally becomes in Hali's *Shikwa-e Hind*) insofar as it faces its producers as an object with which no old-fashioned relationship can be established. In this sense India is an invention of colonial capitalism because it is deployed as an object with worth only as a value. Indeed Hali himself describes the enterprise of Muslim identity as a troublesome buying off or buying into an India as colonial commodity:

Yan nikle hain sawde ko diram leke purine
Awr sikka rawan shahr men muddat se naya hay.
(Hali 1970 [1888]: 127)
We have come out here to trade with the old dirham
While new coin has been circulating in town for some time.

8 What this couplet does is to suggest that a native desire for the freedom of exchange-value has no currency in a situation where money itself belongs to the new colonial world that has to be bought out. That is to say Hali's commodification of communal desire ceases to have purchase once it is realized that there is no freedom of exchange in an

India that demands from her buyer a simulacrum of use-value as the price of ownership. And yet India's value as commodity-fetish is not unproblematic, as Hali's treatment of her/it illustrates. Indeed the kind of relationship which the Muslim gentry established with India, one in which she/it possessed them in both the natural and supernatural senses of this word, inevitably puts its value in doubt:

> *Shikwa qismat ka hay jo yan khinch kar lai hamen*
> *Tujh ko ay hindustan kis munh se den ilzam ham*
> (Hali 1970 [1888]: 197)
> (My) complaint is against fate, which pulled us here
> O India, how is it possible for us to blame you?

9 Hali's personification of India might be an attempt at establishing a value-relationship with an alien space by humanizing it. But humanizing India as a cruel beloved, with the relationship of seduction and humiliation this implies, is more than slightly troubling. Hali's India is not the asexual Mother India of a certain Indian nationalism, but a powerful, sexualized woman with whom it is very difficult to establish a positive relationship, or rather a masculine relationship of dominance. In effect, the emasculation of the Muslim gentry before a potent and seductive India as woman suggests that she could exist in a proper relationship with a masculine self only as Englishman.

10 Sayyid Ahmad Khan made use of a different image of India, as a bride whose two eyes were the Hindu and Muslim communities (S.A. Khan 1963 [1889]: 41-2). In employing this image to foster religious harmony, Sir Sayyid suggested that Hindus and Muslims were only related in terms of an India that somehow existed apart from them and in whose material weight they were in fact imprisoned, only in this way being forced into a relationship. As with Hali, therefore, Sir Sayyid's attempt to establish a value-relationship with India as a sexualized woman ends up quite inadvertently in a feminization of the gentle-born Muslim man, for only the English self has the pleasure of a dominating relationship with India. The invention of India, in other words, is not simply the creation of a new political space and new political relations, but the invention of a whole new way of thinking and being. The question of value I have raised here consistently problematizes the Muslim gentry's establishment in the colonial state. And this means that it becomes forever impossible to grasp India as such, or to make oneself at home in it.

Cartography of Conquest

11 One of the ways India was imagined by North India's Muslim gentry was as landscape, which is to say as an empty, uniform object that presupposed the country as a cartographic image. How did this occur in their thought, and what did it mean in terms of inherited ideas of place? Perhaps we can find out by looking at the shift colonialism marks in geography. To begin with, pre-colonial geography was a human one, a discipline that included man at its center and even as its microcosm, something that made the landscape itself human and vital (Miquel 1967, v. 1: VIII). And this means not only that geography could not exist in a dichotomy of subject and object, but also that it could not exist as such, because if topographical features were not part of an alien unity but subordinated to human relationships, they could only be seen pointillistically (Miquel 1967,v. 2: 86). Pre-colonial cartography provides a point of entry into what geographical pointillism might mean as far as the representation of space is concerned. Mughal map-making, then, was of two sorts. First, medieval itineraries, guides, or route-

maps based on travelers' descriptions and on distances between points; and second, a cartography based on coordinates (latitudes and longitudes) that was introduced in the 14th century (Habib 1977: 122): 'The former suited a flat surface framed by grids; and the later, a sphere encompassed by meridians and parallels'.

12 The first form, of the guide, disregards landscape in favor of the route, and as such is humanly or historically topographic, including buildings, animals, and people. Among such maps are those of the Ali Mardan Canal around 1760, at the Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Hyderabad (Gole 1989: 104-9), and more especially, military maps like that of Awrangzeb's Afghan campaign (1674-77) (Gole 1989: 146). There is no single subject position, however, for this kind of cartography, in which images and lettering are aligned according to the topography itself as it would be seen from the ground, thus forcing the reader to adopt different postures with regard to the map. Good examples of such cartography are the plans for Surat in Safi bin Vali al-Qazvini's *Anis al-Hajj* (1676), a guide to the Meccan pilgrimage commissioned by Awrangzeb's daughter Zebunnisa and now at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji museum (Gole 1989: 162). But the most splendid illustrations of such cartography are undeniably provided by scroll maps, where the reader is positioned inside the route itself, with prospects opening up on either side. Such, for instance, is the map of Shahjahanabad just prior to the 1750s, in London's Victoria and Albert Museum (Gole 1989: 178-9). And this mode of seeing goes back to antiquity in that the visible presents itself not as a uniform object as canvas placed before a stationary subject according to linear perspective, but as a plurality of places or entities located in a concave space in which a moving subject sees them according to curvilinear perspective. It is angle, in other words, and not distance, that locates vision (Simon 1988: 67-9).

13 The second type of Mughal map, the table of coordinates, might be non-topographical and considerably vaster than the route map, but it is in fact not strictly geographical at all, which is to say not representative:

> The impulse for the compilation of these tables derived only secondarily from interest in geography. Astronomical observation demanded the determination of the latitude and longitude of the point from which observations were being made. The science of astrology, requiring the casting of accurate horoscopes, intensified the anxiety to have the terrestrial coordinates correctly determined. There was a religious impulse too: Muslims must pray facing Mecca, and the mosques must be aligned accordingly. The direction in which Mecca lay from any place could, however, be determined only if the latitudes and longitudes of both the places were known. Lists of places with their coordinates were thus compiled independently of the geographers. (Habib 1977: 128-9)

14 This lack of representativeness is emphasized when we consider that such maps do not normally mark the positions of towns with points, effectively transforming them into tables (Habib 1977: 125). Furthermore, they divide the world into seven latitudinal climes or *iqlim,* which destroy any idea of contiguous land masses by cutting them up into cross-sections in which, for example, India would be divided into four slices, each appearing in a different map. So in Sadiq Isfahani's *Shahid-i Sadiq,* an encyclopedia completed at Jawnpur in 1647, what we take to be 'India' is never represented as such but appears only in fragments (Gole 1989: 82). This does not mean, of course, that India cannot be spoken of; indeed the Mughal writer Abul Fazl describes it in the *Ain-i Akbari*, but neither as a foundational space for politics, nor as a unit of representation.[3]

15 The colonial invention of India meant its subordination to what Yves Lacoste, in his book *Paysages Politiques,* calls geographicity, a foundational space devoid of human relations. But such a landscape was not created overnight. It was thought through in ways that shelved older geographies in interesting ways. Nazir Ahmad, for instance, a prominent modernist writer, published in 1873 a novel, *Banat un-Na'ash* (Daughters of the Bier), promoting girls' education. In it he preserved older conceptions of space within the new geographicity; a preservation that was only possible within the circumscribed pedagogy of women, and which so retained masculine meaning only as a domestic vernacular. Yet the novel's very particular inclusion of older spaces seems to have posed a threat to geographicity that was barely obscured by its vernacular domesticity. Ahmad's lesson on geography for girls, for example, begins with a representation of the Arabian Peninsula that simultaneously emphasizes and vitiates its geographicity by describing it as an inhuman emptiness that is filled with meaning because it happened to be the site of divine revelation (Nazir Ahmad 1967: 185-6). God, then, gives meaning to geographicity in a way that puts its foundationality into question without at the same time contesting it. But this is not all. Another contradiction arises in Ahmad's attempt to relate geographical names and places. The litany of place-names that one of the novel's characters reels off (Hindustan, Chin, Afghanistan, Arab, Iran, Turan) has its own non-cartographical logic, even though it is read off a modern map (Nazir Ahmad 1967: 188). In other words such a list is not only ordered in terms of homophony rather than cartography, it also includes places like Arabia, which is described as having a religious rather than political meaning, and Turan, which is a cultural area that does not fall within political boundaries. This naming, however, derives meaning from the very geographicity it calls into doubt. So when one of the book's girl students tries to find Delhi on a world map, she is looking not for its location but its name. And her teacher emphasizes this dislocation of place and name by telling her charge that the map's scale is too great to include this word. Delhi, in other words, never appears as a cartographical point on a map that presupposes such a location (Nazir Ahmad 1967: 189).

16 What I have been trying to demonstrate here is that the problematization of geographicity as a foundation for identification itself depended upon such a foundationalism in a fashion which made it part of an unresolved contradiction. And this might have been the case because the colonization of this geography resulted only in an imaginary exit from it. In other words, it resulted in an India as landscape that stood in perfect objectivity before an English subject even as it trapped the Indian within this objectivity defined by a colonial gaze. The Muslim community that was created in this space was both alienated from and imprisoned within it. But not quite, for the new India that opened up before the Muslim gentry was also a landscape of suspense, a faintly menacing country which had to be mapped by exploration rather than be navigated by a guide.[4] That is to say an India that has become not only representable, but also something that has to be represented in order to eliminate the risks of the unknown. Such a grasping, however, was as contradictory as geographicity. It, too, depended on the systematic particularization or vernacularization of its opposite in a way that allowed representation to be thought as such, but not to be thought through. In his introduction to the first edition of the *Musaddas*, for example, Hali describes his youth as an aimless wandering in a deceptively pleasing landscape (Hali n.d. [1879]: 1-2). At the age of forty, then, the poet comes to realize that he is in the same place where he started, and suddenly a new landscape of anxiety opens up before him as a domain to be grasped:

> Raising my eyes, I saw on either side, ahead and behind, a spacious area (*maydan*) within which numberless paths opened up in every direction. [...] I wanted to set forth and explore (*sayr*) this area, but that step which for twenty years had not moved from one attitude to another, and whose range had been bounded by a yard or two of earth, was not easily put to work in such a wide space. Apart from this, the useless wandering of twenty years had made shirkers of hands and feet that had also expended their strength. But because there was (some) movement in my feet, sitting still became difficult. For some days such a situation subsisted that one foot would step forward and the other step back. But suddenly I saw a servant of God, who is a man of this place, proceeding upon a difficult path. Many people who were walking with him would tire and fall behind. Many others were falling and rising along with him. But their lips were blistered and their feet calloused. [...] However that honored man who was their guide appeared so fresh as to be neither weary from the road nor concerned with the loss of his companions. (Hali n.d. [1879]: 2-3)

17 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who is the leader here referred to, goes on to take Hali by the hand and guide him through this landscape that is yet grasped as a totality. Exploration, in other words, is here forestalled by a guiding that nonetheless has meaning only in terms of the former. And how could it be otherwise when the colonial landscape still surrounded and fixed its Muslim subject in a way that allowed its objectivity to exist only as a presumption? Or as Hali puts it, paraphrasing a couplet of Hafiz to describe this new space:

> *Khabaram nist ke manzilgah-e maqsud kujast*
> *In qadr hast ke bang-e jarasi miayad.*
> (Hali n.d. [1879]: 5)
> I don't know where the final destination might be
> It exists to the extent that the caravan-bell sounds back.

Literary Landscapes

18 Since the colonial landscape, then, is often contradicted by a colonized experience, its grasping becomes a matter of some anxiety. This is why India gives meaning to the modernist landscape, because it comes to represent the location of such anxiety. Thus the incredible panorama that opens Abdul Halim Sharar's novel *Firdaws-e Barin* (Paradise on Earth), or the several landscapes depicted in Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* (the name of its heroine), panoramas which inevitably presage alarm or attack, and which, I want to suggest, are only made possible by the colonial invention of India. The former novel, first published in 1899, begins with the following description of an Iranian landscape:

> It is now the year 651 of the Hijri era, but (for) one-hundred and fifty years prior to this, that high and unpaved road which begins at the southern shore of the Caspian Sea and, going through the city of Amul, crosses the country of Mazandaran and the region of Rudbar, referred to in the *Shahnamah* as the abode of fairies, cuts through the mountains of Taleqan from north to south, (finally) proceeding to the city of Qazvin, had been considered extremely hazardous for travelers—and especially for pilgrims. For a long time the state of this road has been such that even in the daytime large caravans are looted and the bodies of their victims preserved for years by the snow and cold as signs of the (thieves') tyranny, murder, and devastation.
> The days mark the beginning of wintertime. The previous year's snow has not yet melted completely and a new layer is (already) beginning to set—but the freezing has still not reached such a level as to annihilate the signs of spring and the pleasures of blossom-time. A few flowers from late in the season remain, and here and there, their lover and connoisseur the Badakhshani nightingale can also be

> seen voicing his thousand-storied and melodious tune. This mountainous land is not naked and sun-scorched like the dry and virtuous hills of Arabia; rather, the shadowy trees and thick bushes everywhere have made (these mountains) into excellent hideaways and lonely dens for worshippers of nature and true connoisseurs of Providence. And wherever there are clumps of trees, there, under the blue tent of the sky, Providence has spread out a floor of green and velvety grass. Should someone sit and wish to sample the wine of Shiraz, he would find here, instead of the Ruknabad canal, the canal of Veranjan, which, in the passage of not even one and a half centuries, perhaps, has cut through the Rud-i Safed (highlands) and, coursing through different mountain passes, fallen into the Caspian Sea near the city of Khurramabad.
>
> Exactly these fascinating scenes, these enchanting views of Providence, have given birth to numerous stories about the mountains. Some people say that paradise is located in these very defiles, and some consider that although the force of arms of Kiyumarzh, Rustam, and Nariman have annihilated the ancient demons, many fairies still keep the old memory today, inhabiting these lonely places. Among good believing folk many have seen these fairies flying, and some travellers have even glimpsed great crowds of terrifying *genii* emerge from the passes. It is also thought that whoever comes upon these bands of fairies by himself dies immediately. (Sharar 1961: 1-2)

19 Now the novel character of this description resides both in its length and in its importance to the story. Previously, literary descriptions of nature had been brief and pointillistic, certainly not anything in the way of cartographic panoramas. What is more, they acted simply as settings for narrative; settings differentiated only on the basis of their symbolic appropriateness to the events related. Thus traditionally nature was full of stock images often described by anthropomorphic analogies: the proud rose, the languishing nightingale, the coquettish cypress, etc. Sharar's landscape is not only panoramic and important in its own right, it also constitutes one of the major problems with which the novel's characters have to grapple. The landscape has become here a subject, as much a character in the narrative as any human being.

20 But what kind of relationship can be established with such a character? One of cartographic knowledge, since the whole story is about discovering the secrets harbored by this landscape. Such a relationship is simultaneously one of control, because this landscape of suspense can only become a space of freedom once its secrets have not only been exposed, but destroyed as well. And indeed this is exactly what happens in the novel, where the fabulous castle of the Assassins, with its artificial paradise, is demolished to de-mystify the landscape that hid it as phantasmagoria.

21 Yet it is not simply what the landscape conceals that makes it a space of suspense. Rather, the very passage of nature, which seems to give the landscape a life of its own, compels its conquest by a humanity which first appears in the narrative in the form of beings lost in a panorama whose events mark a secret and autonomous existence. The progress of the story entails the complete subordination of this landscape, a dominion that is announced at its very inception as a space of suspense:

> The above-mentioned road is spread out over a long distance, but only that part (of it) which runs along the Veranjan canal is in our sight. From this place the plains of the region of Rudbar have ended and the hard, twisted, ups and downs of the mountains begin. Some distance ahead of here the road has taken another direction, and the canal, turning about in the valleys of the Elburz range, has disappeared in the difficult paths and convoluted defiles.
>
> Only a few hours, perhaps, are left of the evening; the sun has arrived close-by the peaks ahead. Its weak rays, which had produced a little heat, have gone, and the

> cold gusts of wind that are coming from the high ice-fields are enough to make humans shiver.
> At this place, and in such a condition, two travelers are slowly moving northwards, covered-up from head to foot and resembling a couple of large bundles. Both are astride their small and exhausted mules. From their lassitude and huddled state it appears that they are poor clerics or fakirs of some town who, separated from the lifestyles of both town and camp, are undertaking a pilgrimage from some religious necessity or for the glory of the sacred. But no, they have come close and it is evident that they are neither clerics nor dervishes, but both young gentlefolk, and what is more surprising, of the two one is a man and the other a woman. (Sharar 1961 [1899]: 3)

22 Let us stop where the adventure begins to point out that while India might be a prison for the Muslim community, insofar as it is created as a space of suspense, it also raises the issue of this community's liberty. The freedom of the modernist Muslim subject as subject (which is to say as someone who knows by representing) in and over its in-human, apolitical, completely naturalized vastness; a freedom from India's oppressive alienation. Thus in the passages quoted above, the characters' lack of freedom is illustrated by the fact that it is not they who see the landscape so well described by Sharar, but rather the landscape as a character with its own passage which sees and situates them. Only at the end of the novel, with the destruction of the Assassins who had controlled this landscape, who had indeed been part of it, do these characters look upon nature as controlling subjects. And this nature has now become merely interesting, part of the aesthetics of control. So the novel's last chapter, which disenchants the landscape, begins with a significant line: 'When Husayn and Zammarud [the story's hero and heroine] emerged from their castles to see, a strange world appeared before them (Sharar 1961 [1899]: 158).' This time, however, the strangeness had to do with the breaking of the landscape's spell and the consequent shift of the characters from a kind of stupor of spectacular contemplation to the mastery of action:

> In the same state as they had first left home, Husayn and Zammarud set out for the earth of the Hijaz and left (behind) the ruins of Alamut and all its corpses to the (wild) asses and swarms of carnivorous birds. (Sharar 1961 [1899]: 175)

23 But how is this at all possible? How can the landscape be made innocuous so easily, especially in a colonial situation? Where do the problems go? Sharar's novel, which ends with the repentance of all concerned, with the realization that it was they who were to blame for the landscape's dread history (allowing themselves to be seduced by it), suggests that the problem of the landscape is displaced onto the subject as a kind of solution. And in fact a depoliticized, dehumanized India as landscape really does call forth a subjective relationship with itself. But this is not the relationship of citizen and state, something unthinkable in a colonial order. The Muslim subject, insofar as it exists as a subject *vis-à-vis* India (and we have seen that such a relationship is rather troubling), cannot be its citizen, but rather, paradoxically, India's object. That is to say India can only become a space of freedom or agency if its object-hood is in a way neutralized or displaced onto the subject. In other words, the opening of India as a landscape of freedom implies the creation of a subjectivity that in grounding this object-hood also displaces its problematic character onto itself, thus transforming it into a space of agentive liberty. Insofar as India is naturalized by the Muslim gentry, they blame themselves for its loss, thus displacing politics from the world onto the self. As Hali puts it in the *Musaddas*:

Jo kuchh hain woh sab apni halaton ke hain kartut
Shikwa hay na zamane ka na qismat ka gila hay
(Hali n.d. [1879]: 127)
Whatever we are we are of our own making
I neither complain against time nor do I blame fate.

24 India, therefore, remains unproblematized, or is rather questioned only in terms of subjective value, so becoming a space of freedom for this burdened self. Nevertheless, the effort to know India never quite releases it from phantasmagoria. Liberty is conceived of only in terms of the longing of a subject to situate itself in a territory whose colonial nature is more or less obscured, and which is therefore phantasmagoric. That is to say liberty is not seen as the union of subject and object in the way of Kantian or Hegelian philosophy, for the landscape does not pose a problem of knowledge here but one of mere situation. Instead, liberty means that the gentle-born Muslim subject is looking, as agentive subject, for a place in the naturalized if still problematic landscape of colonial India.

25 Situating oneself in India involves for the gentry novel questions of how to belong, or to belong in what capacity. For as the poet Salik remarks after the Mutiny of 1857:

Zamin ho gai dushman, na pai ja-e sabat
Thahr saka na kisi jae apna pae sabat
(Naim Ahmad 1968: 251)
The land has become an enemy no firm ground could be got
My foot was unable to rest firmly in any place.

Beneath the Ruins

26 Let us try to find out what this belonging to India might mean by looking at the birth of a homogenous landscape in the Urdu elegy, the only poetic genre in the language to emphasize landscape at all. And what is more, to emphasize a landscape that is recognizably Indian, even though it happens to be located, by a fine irony, in Arabia and Iraq. The *marsiya* was typically a short devotional poem commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Husayn and his family in a battle with Umayyad forces on the plain of Karbala. It was a ritual form associated with the Shia and meant to procure merit or *sawab* by eliciting tears from mourning assemblies. In the 18th century, however, the elegy begins to be included within profane literature or *adab* and thus becomes separable from Shia ritual (Numani 1989 [1907]: 26). Furthermore, with the 19th century poet Mir Anis of Lucknow, it is fully transformed into a long narrative poem in the *musaddas* form, becoming the first poetic genre to abandon its particular function (mourning, in this case) in favor of a general representation. To this end it plunders the special characteristics of other poetic genres such as the *qasida* or ode, and *ghazal* or lyric (Numani 1989 [1907]: 26). The 19th century *marsiya,* therefore, destroys the pluralism of pre-modern poetics, which had assigned particular aesthetic functions to each poetic genre, by combining them into a holistic representation standing outside the reader like a landscape. So Anis, for example, compares his art to a painting that manages to describe all the qualities of a landscape (Anis 1977: 60-5). Indeed the naturalism of the new *marsiya* becomes its greatest glory; Hali, in his important work of literary criticism, the *Muqaddima-e Sher-o Shairi* [Introduction to Verse and Versification], devotes six pages to lauding it (Hali 1988 [1879]: 183-8). And the historian Muhammad Shibli Numani (1989 [1907]: 146), who published the first serious study of the colonial *marsiya*, remarked

upon the novelty of such *manazir-e qudrat* or scenes of providence. In fact the radical character of this landscape was such that even half a century after its appearance, Shibli Numani could not assume its wholesale naturalization, and had to define it for his readers by comparison with more traditional narrative forms. The word *manzar,* for example, he can only translate by the English 'scene' (1989: 152), which he familiarizes by calling it a form of *waqea nigari*, narrative of action, whose originality lies in the fact that while older narratives were concerned with separate human actions, the 'scene' constitutes their collective quality, *majmui hesiyat* (Numani 1989 [1907]: 152). But *waqea nigari* itself was rare in Urdu poetry (Numani 1989 [1907]: 174) because it had not really been considered literary at all, being narrated only in common or crude language (Numani 1989 [1907]: 176). Shibli Numani, then, was the first to theorize the newness of the *marsiya's* landscape by defining the narrative of action as a total representation (Numani 1989 [1907]: 175) whose perfection approached the art of spectacle, *muraqqa nigari* (Numani 1989 [1907]: 176).

27 The old *marsiya* had been situated within a set of moral oppositions that it attempted to heighten. So the martyrdom of Husayn by Umayyad forces might constitute a condemnation of worldly power; the Shia devotion to Husayn's lineage would be a denial of Sunni authorities; the tragedy of Karbala could negate officialdom's rhetoric of victory and its history of virtue; and the elegy's battlefield as a site of moral action stood opposed to such alternate sites as the city, the garden, or even the Sufi wilderness. What the new *marsiya* indicated was the disappearance of many of these associations in a homogeneous landscape. Thus the city, far from being the symbol of order and virtue that Husayn abandoned and so denied for the battlefield, now came to be included in the elegy as part of the same landscape as Karbala (Narang 1981: 154-9). Similarly, the *marsiya's* oppositional intertextuality now lay not simply with Sunni histories of order and virtue, but increasingly with erotic poetry, towards which it adopted an ironic tone (Narang 1981: 166-70). In other words the new *marsiya* increasingly set itself off against the more general or secular space of the old regime instead of commenting upon the particular metaphysical places of Sunni officialdom. Thus Husayn is compared to the *ghazal's* beloved, his battling companions to flower-like youths, the plain of Karbala to a garden, etc. And this irony, in addition, served more to problematize the symbolic domain of the old order than to contest it.

28 In replacing the old metaphysical places of the elegy with an actual and problematic landscape, the *marsiya,* we might say, has moved from myth to history.[5] Which is to say it has moved from a universalized history to a very particular narrative of loss, the disappearance of a genealogical polity, the *imamate*, from a protesting landscape. This is in fact a major theme in the 19th century *marsiya,* the voiding or de-politicization of a landscape that cries out in horror but is finally reduced to silence:

> *Yeh dasht-e holnak kahan, yeh chaman kahan*
> *Jangal kahan, batul ke gul perahan kahan*
> *Kunba kahan nabi ka, yeh dar-e mehan kahan*
> *Qabren kahan shikasta dilon ki, watan kahan*
> *Aye hain dhundhte hue is arz-e pak ko*
> *Sach hay ke khak khinchti hay apni khak ko.*
> (Anis 1977: 131)
> Where this fearsome plain? Where this garden?
> Where the jungle? Where the virgin's flowered garment?
> Where the Prophet's family? Where this abode of troubles?
> Where are the graves of broken hearts? Where the homeland?

They have arrived searching for this pure earth
It's true that the soil reclaims its own.

29 This empty landscape, which has buried its own history, then becomes a kind of ruin from which people excavate their identity, and with which they try to build a relationship, for as Walter Benjamin says of the baroque landscape, '(i)n the ruin history has physically merged into the setting' (Benjamin 1990 [1928]: 177-8). This is the only way in which the Muslim community, too, can establish a relationship with India as a neutral landscape, one that exists only as the sign of its despoliation: 'Because it is mute, fallen nature mourns. But the converse of this statement leads even deeper into the essence of nature: its mournfulness makes it become mute' (Benjamin 1990 [1928]: 224).

30 To build a relationship with this bereft, de-humanized landscape by searching its earth for a history is a novel phenomenon. Previously, the earth, not the landscape, functioned as the great producer and destroyer of histories, as in the famous quatrains of Umar Khayyam, for example. And insofar as it constituted a ruin, the earth did so as a symbol of human vanity and not as a mystery, a kind of archaeological mystery, which is what the ruin becomes in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Asar us-Sanadid* [Ancestral Traces], a description of the monuments of Delhi, first published in 1847, whose second edition of 1854 is particularly marked by an archaeological vision (Naim 2010: 669-708). This attitude is opposed to a more traditional conception of the land that is expressed in the following couplet by Sir Sayyid's contemporary, the Delhi poet Mirza Ghalib:

Sab kahan kuchh lalah-o gul men numayan ho gayen
Khak men kya suraten hongen ke pinhan ho gayen
(Ghalib 1990 [1863]: 118)
Not everything has become manifest in the tulip and the rose
What forms must there be hidden in the dust!

31 Unlike Benjamin's baroque poetry or Khayyam's verse, however, modernist Muslims could not turn the transitory character of life or the meaninglessness of nature into the desire for an afterworld or even for oblivion. They had to exhume a past because what was at issue was a very particular political relationship with the land and precisely not a general metaphysical one. So the poet Ikram has this to say about the destruction of Delhi in 1857:

Khak men mil gaye almas-e hunnar
Khod kar dekh to kan-e Dehli[6]
The treasures of artifice have fallen to dust
Dig the mine of Delhi and see.

32 If the world has become a picture or representation, then the Muslim gentry's task was to build a relationship with it as a finding of the truth behind its image; in this case the truth of a history which has left nothing but ruins on the Indian landscape. Now it is exactly such a denuded landscape that suggests subjective liberty, even if this freedom is nothing more than a quest for a different kind of relationship with the new country. After all, the subject who faces this landscape is always alienated, even if this alienation is simultaneously an imprisonment in India, and the panorama itself, void as it is of human relationships, is inevitably a lure for freedom as agentive belonging. The colonial *marsiya* repeatedly voices this predicament, to such an extent that when the Delhi poet Shefta, for example, heard the opening lines of an elegy by Anis which barely introduced the theme of a dislocated subject in an alien geography, he is supposed to have said, 'why did Mir Sahib take the trouble to narrate a whole *marsiya?* This line itself is a *marsiya*' (Masud 1981: 273). Here is the line:

Aj shabbir pe kya alam-e tanhai hay
(Anis 1974: 319)
What a world of loneliness is upon Husayn today

33 This phrase derives its particular poignancy from the word *kya*, 'what', which expresses the strangeness of the world both as question and as emphasis. But Anis's landscape was not entirely modern. It was certainly spread out like a canvas before a simultaneously alienated and trapped subject (the colonial *marsiya* replacing a narrative of temporal succession with a canvas-like simultaneity of action) (Masud 1981: 286-7), but this subject was also able to move about the landscape in a traditional way. Thus the elegies of Anis are peculiar in that they depict panoramas which can only be seen by what Nayyar Masud, in an essay on the poet's scenography, calls 'film technique' (Masud 1981: 286-7), the zooming and focusing of a subject as camera into and out of the landscape as canvas (Masud 1981: 284). Although the concave space and angular vision of medieval optics has been replaced, therefore, by a flat canvas and a perspectival field of vision based on distance, the subject is still not confronted by a landscape as pure or impenetrable object. And so the elegies of Anis perhaps constitute a transition point from one kind of optics to another; the last moment where an object, India, in this case, while it is certainly neutral, homogenous, or de-politicized, has yet to confront an autonomous subject as its other.

Conclusion

34 I have sought to argue in this essay that the formation of the 'Muslim community' in colonial India necessitated a rethinking of the country itself in its physical and political geography. The Muslim 'modernists' of North India who were gathered in the Aligarh Movement struggled both to assimilate their *qawm* within the colonial cartography that was coming to define India as an idea, and, simultaneously, to inhabit it in distinctive new ways. Their efforts to 'master' a colonial cartography was constantly being thwarted by an unwillingness or inability to adopt the distanced perspective this required, with the Muslim community forever slipping into the position of an object rather than subject of knowledge. In the process India was often represented, by a creative adaptation of older literary tropes, as a powerful and sexualized woman, or as an example of the kind of body politic whose mastery had once been confined to the king. In either case the *qawm* was seen to be alienated from India newly conceived as a cartographic space, but also as being trapped within it in a way that made for literary descriptions dominated by notions of shame and humiliation.

35 Even when it was modern geography rather than the human figure that provided the subject of Muslim reflection, these men were able to presuppose the novel foundationalism of colonial cartography while at the same time operating within it in 'non-modern' ways. Rather than seeing in this situation merely their 'incomplete' modernization, however, I suggest that it represents a real impasse, with no colonized population able to assume a mastery over the country's cartography that they did not in fact possess. Moreover the propensity of the Urdu writers I deal with to display a kind of epistemological double consciousness is interesting in its own right, not least because it allows us to undo the strict distinctions of a stagist history. Having looked at the way in which these writers understood 'India' in terms of the human figure, cartography and landscape, I go on to show how they transformed another pre-modern trope, that of the

transitory world, in order to make themselves at home in the colonized territory of the Raj by digging underneath its surface and occupying the ruins of their past.

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NOTES

1. For an exploration of 'Islamic modernism' as an intellectual project, see Faisal Devji (2007b).
2. See for this Martin Heidegger (1977 [1943]: 71).
3. Abu'l-fazl Allami, *The A'in-i Akbari* (1965 [1596]: 2).
4. I take this distinction from Yves Lacoste (1990: 5-15).
5. I take this distinction from Walter Benjamin (1990).
6. See Naim Ahmad (1968: 224).

ABSTRACTS

The formation of the 'Muslim community' in colonial India necessitated a rethinking of the country itself in its physical and political geography. The Muslim modernists of North India who were gathered in the Aligarh Movement struggled both to assimilate themselves within the colonial cartography that was coming to define India as an idea, and, simultaneously, to inhabit it in distinctive new ways. Rather than serving to demonstrate the 'incompletion' of their modernity, this made for a narrative illustrating an epistemological 'double consciousness', of which this essay explores the Urdu literary tropes of the human figure, cartography, landscape and the ruin.

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Keywords: Muslim community, Aligarh Movement, Urdu literature

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